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ABSTRACT

There may be a link between the systems movement and the women's movement. The systems approach allows an observer to identify important relationships and behavior within a system. This approach recognizes that observers of a system will be taking differing and subjective views of the system, depending on their own perspectives. Among the various systems methods, all are systemic (directed towards identifying, understanding, and helping to resolve systems in the problem situation), systematic and iterative. The systems approach is holistic, not reductionist in method. Working women identify features of life enabling them to cope with job and home responsibilities. These insights are the result of a real understanding of the women workers' personal relationships with the mesh of systems which contribute to daily survival. Women in managerial positions can understand key relationships in their working environment, thus exhibiting good systems thinking. Feminist businesses give an example of understanding business systemically by protecting a chosen set of human values in preference to standard criteria for business success. Radical feminists attribute oppression of women to the patriarchical system; socialist feminists attribute it to the capitalist system. Women are using the systems approach at home, at work, and in their political lives. A systematic way of understanding the world can lead to more and better feminist research and action. (ABL)

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WOMEN AND SYSTEMS : IS THERE A LINK ?*

Is there a link between women and systems ? Can the two sets intersect ? As my own academic base is in systems , or the systems movement as systems scientists like to call it, and my personal and political base is in the womens movement, I have often reflected on the relevance of the one to the other.

This evening I should like to begin by outlining what I understand as the systems approach, a coherent set of ideas usually made impenetrable by the jargon surrounding it. I shall then try to demonstrate that systems thinking is already a part of many womens lives and finally to suggest that a systemic understanding of the world can empower women and strengthen feminist research and action.

Systems introduced[1]

Essentially, the systems approach is a way of making sense of the world in which we live, enabling the observer to identify important relationships and behaviour within it. A complex

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situation, entity, organisation or system, a department store for example, is seen as a collection of vital parts or system components connected together in an organised way - management, sales assistants, catering staff, cleaners, customers, buildings, merchandise, cash, stock rooms, shelves computers and tills. These lie within a system boundary, not a physical perimeter but a notional one, separating the system from its environment which also has components, in this case perhaps, advertising agency, bankers, suppliers and competitors. Components of either system or environment may be large units or sub-systems - the personnel department, or indivisible elements - the sales assistant selling hats. The system is open to its environment, interacting with it and the system is changed if its components leave it. Open systems are generally dynamic, adapting over time to changing environmental conditions such as supply shortages and fashion trends. The system assembly as a whole must be of interest to an external observer - a fashion house or an auditing firm, or to an observer inside the system - the computer manager or a wages clerk.

Non-objectivity in systems

An exciting feature of the systems approach is that it recognises that observers of a system will be taking differing and subjective views of it depending on their own values and perspectives. Systems does not claim to be an objective and dispassionate discipline, but acknowledges the benefits of identifying the scientists reasons for making a study. Thus the

same system could be perceived and described differently by independent observers, who may also ascribe differing relationships, behaviour and goals to it.

Systems methods[2]

So far I have developed a picture of systems thinking for better understanding. However, systems also offers frameworks for analysing and acting upon complexity. There exists a variety of methods for working with a wide range of problem situations. Variants of the hard systems approach may be best suited for technical, equipment based systems - telecommunications systems or nuclear power plants, or in selecting marketing strategies where a substantial body of statistical data can be assembled. Soft systems approaches are used where problem situations arise from complex inter-relationships involving people: how to expand a company or a health care facility, or managing staff relations or truancy in a school district. Failures, too, are susceptible to systems thinking, regardless of whether they first appear to concern hard systems such as the Challenger explosion, or soft systems such as unworkable custody and access arrangements for the children of estranged couples.

A common theme amonst all systems methods is that they are systemic, that is, directed towards identifying, understanding and helping to resolve systems in the problem situation; they are also, of course, systematic in using well tried and tested

stage-by-stage paths to understanding and resolution. Lastly, they are iterative; a final set of insights may not be reached in a linear fashion but is more likely to be the result of several passes through one or more stages of the method.

Holism

Perhaps the most important idea in systems and the one most relevant to this symposium is that the perceptions of systems scientists deal with relationships within wholes, not the isolated behaviour of separate cells or compartments. The systems approach is holistic, not reductionist in its method. It enables systems thinkers to step outside conventional truths about a situation and to make new links or gain new insights where none was previously established or expected.

Making the link

Well, what has all this to do with women ? I shall argue that women already perceive the world as composed of systems and then show that their holistic perceptions are a radical and positive departure from the way in which they are supposed to think.

Women and work

We are seeing increasing numbers of women entering the labor force. In 1983, 55% of all American women were working outside the home or seeking paid work, 52% of wives worked, 45% of

mothers with children under a year old returned to work and 83% of women maintaining families alone worked at full time jobs.[3] These women moostly contend with low, unequal pay (a female clerk is paid around $10,500 per annum, 65% of the average income of her male counterpart)[4], long, inflexible, often antisocial hours of work, juggling perhaps several different, interdependent childcare arrangements and the regular domestic maintenance tasks of shopping, cooking and cleaning. Both at work and at home women quickly identify features of life that will enable them to cope with their dual role. they are well able to assess whether the introduction of word processing in their office represents an improvement or deterioration in their working conditions, whether the trade union is genuinely interested in its women members and is therefore prepared to hold meetings during working hours, and which neighbors can be relied upon to babysit during a household emergency.

I would claim that such insights are nothing to do with so-called feminine intuition, but are the result of a real understanding of the women workers personal relationships with the mesh of systems which contribute to daily survival.

More workers, and therefore more women, are now employed in interdisciplinary fields such as medical technology, aerospace programs or computer aided drafting. In these fast-developing areas systems thinking provides a way of seeing how new tasks fit into the overall patterns created by applying new technologies; it may also help in understanding the operation of increasingly

sophisticated equipment.

In managerial positions, women are able to see through the predominant macho power culture. By understanding key relationships within their working environment and looking at their organisation as a whole they tend to develop more open strategies for dealing with corporate problem-solving and personnel. This is not, I believe, what has recently been called "feminization"[5], but the result of good systems thinking.

In the small, but slowly increasing, number of enterprises set up, operated and controlled by feminists, maintaining a power structure is not likely to figure in the list of organisational goals. The predominating values are more likely to express concern for employee health, job satisfaction and childcare commitments, and to lead to the pursuit of contracts for work with direct human benefit, rather that producing high profits or strengthening military advantage. This is a prime example of understanding business systemically and protecting a chosen set of human values in preference to the criteria normally used to measure business success; the acknowledged subjectivity of the systems approach legitimises and promotes decision-making in such non-traditional environments.

Women and politics

At a theoretical level, radical feminists attribute the oppression of women to the patriarchal system and socialist

feminists attribute it to the capitalist system. I realise that these are gross over-simplifications, but I wish to point out that both analyses seek systemic rather than narrow explanations.

At a global level, women have demonstrated their understanding of nuclear weapons systems by marching, petitioning and negotiating for peace in order to ensure the survival of future generations. They have voiced their concern over pharmaceutical research which refuses to address the social origins of womens mental and physical illness. These are systems which require orchestrated, public confrontation. However, women are not expected to participate in public decision-making or to understand what takes place beyond the confines of "Kinder, Kuche, Kirche". Donald Regan´s now infamous press statement before the 1985 Geneva summit conference confirmed the horrifying extent to which this belief is still held; it is as though 15 years of the womens movement had never existed.[6] Yet systems thinking, which encourages a holistic approach to life, can empower women to subvert and undermine the male-dominated ethic of policy making and simultaneously, to change the direction of their own lives.

Conclusion: the implications of systems for feminist research and action

So, I would say that women are unwittingly using the systems approach at home, at work, in their personal-political and their public-political lives. It provides them with powerful insights into problems and complexity, particularly in an organisational

setting. If included in the repertoire of methods for inquiry and used consciously as a tool for scholarly research it could greatly enrich and reinforce academic studies by and about women, especially in areas of the physical and social sciences where a traditional reductionist view of women still prevails and in newer, interdisciplinary fields. In the current climate of declining funding for research on women,[7] it may help to justify proposals for grants from dwindling sources by demonstrating the legitimacy of the values represented in hypotheses in womens research.

My own interest in and fascination with systems is not about understanding computer systems or that body of knowledge called general systems theory. It is to do with the practical and political strengths of a systemic way of understanding and reordering the world which can, I believe, lead to more and better feminist research and action.

Notes

1. Two introductory books on systems which have very different but readable styles are:
   C.West Churchman "The Systems Approach" Dell Publishing Co New York 1979

R.Carter, J.Martin, B.Mayblin & M.Munday "Systems, Management and Change: A Graphic Guide" Harper & Row London 1984.

For a more extensive and scholarly discussion there is: P.B.Checkland "Systems Thinking, Systems Practice" Wiley London 1981.

2. Systems methods are thoroughly discussed in the printed materials for the course T301 Complexity, Management and Change: Applying a Systems Approach The Open University Press Milton Keynes 1984. These are available from: OUEE Ltd. 12 Cofferidge Close, Stony Stratford, Milton Keynes, MK11 1BY, U.K.

3. Source: AAUW Fact Pack #2 "The Working Family" AAUW Washington DC 1984.

4. Bureau of the Census, Annual Earnings of Full-time Office Workers 1983.

5. See: E.Lenz & B.Myerhoff "The Feminization of America" Tarcher Los Angeles 1985.

6. See almost any American newspaper report for 19th November 1985 on the previous day's pre-summit press conference at which a Washington Post reporter was told by Donald Regan, White House Chief of Staff, that women would rather read the "human interest stuff" from Geneva. He also said

that women would not "understand throw weights or what is happening in Afghanistan or what is happening in human rights".

7. See, for example: The National Council For Research on Women Report from the Commission on New Funding Priorities: "A Declining Federal Committment to Research on Women, 1980-1984" NCRW New York 1985.